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Molleman, Eric

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# How a powerful audience and audience feedback moderate the relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion

Eric Molleman

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

The drive for employees to perform well may tempt them to practice exaggerated self-promotion tactics. The supposition is that those with a strong performance-approach orientation are especially inclined to do this, but that contextual variables are relevant. In this study, I examined the influence of the combination of two contextual variables (perceived audience power and feedback) on the relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion. A sample of 277 employees from two companies participated in the study. I found that the presence of a powerful audience weakened the positive relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion if the feedback from that audience was highly salient, and that a powerful audience strengthened this relationship if the salience of this feedback was low.

## KEYWORDS

Exaggerated self-promotion; performance-approach orientation; perceived audience power; feedback; performance management

## Introduction

Over the past few decades competition has increased substantially for most organizations, making it necessary for these organizations to enhance their performance in order to survive (Jackson, Schuler, & Jiang, 2014). This pressure has trickled down to business units, departments, teams, and individual employees, and has led to an increasing interest in performance management (Aguinis, Joo, & Gottfredson, 2011), which is also reflected in academic interest (e.g. Aguinis, Joo, & Gottfredson, 2012; Aguinis & Pierce, 2008; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017).

The pressure to perform well has not only driven workers to excel but has possibly also motivated them to exaggerate their performance in order to obtain a positive performance evaluation, because such appraisals have consequences

for job security, rewards, promotions, and careers, among other things (Bolino, Kacmar, Tumley, & Gilstrap, 2008). In the literature, overstating one's performance has been described as a self-promotion practice that is considered to be one of the tactics of impression management (Harris, Kacmar, Zivnuska, & Shaw, 2007). Jones and Pittman (1982, p. 241) define self-promotion as 'self-descriptive communications that seek the attributions of competence'. Bolino et al. (2008, p. 1082) define it as the effort to 'communicate abilities and accomplishments to attempt to appear competent'. Making valid claims of capabilities can generally be an effective behavioral strategy; overstating them, however, can inflate and misrepresent the information about behavior or performance. This last type of self-promotion refers to behaviors such as playing up one's own achievements and making one's abilities appear better than they actually are (Bolino & Turnley, 1999; Wayne & Ferris, 1990). If managers are unaware of these overstatements and perceive them to be valid, this may lead to erroneous decisions, for example, with respect to selection, rewards, and promotions (Bolino et al., 2008; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991). Therefore, from a management point of view, it is of practical relevance to identify and regulate such self-promotion practices. In this study, I will focus on this undesirable kind of self-promotion, which I will label 'exaggerated self-promotion'.

Research has shown that some employees are more inclined to use self-promotion practices than others. More specifically, 'performance-approach orientation', one of the personality traits in goal orientation theory (VandeWalle, 2003), has been identified as being a relevant interpersonal difference variable that can predict the use of self-promotion practices (Molleman, Emans, & Turusbekova, 2012). Performance-approach orientation refers to the willingness of individuals to demonstrate superior competence and to obtain positive evaluations of their qualifications from others (Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; VandeWalle, 2001). Essentially, individuals with a performance-approach orientation want to perform well, and from an organizational point of view that is positive. However, a strong performance-approach orientation may also encourage exaggerated self-promotion.

Previous research has shown that the extent to which performance-oriented employees use self-promoting practices depends on the context (Molleman et al., 2012). This is in line with Trait Activation Theory. This theory assumes that traits such as performance-approach orientation are latent predispositions for demonstrating specific behaviors that are actually expressed as a response to trait-relevant situational signals (Tett & Burnett, 2003). As Penney, David, and Witt (2011, p. 303) conclude, '... an abundance of literature demonstrates that the expression of traits in job-related behavior depends on situational cues'. What are the situational cues that may trigger individuals, who score high on performance-approach orientation, to demonstrate exaggerated self-promotion behaviors or to refrain from them? I will argue that the presence of an audience (a concept from accountability and goal-setting theory; Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Locke & Latham, 1990) that has some control over the relevant outcomes of the actor, is an important situational

factor that likely will activate this trait. Those who have a strong performance-approach orientation are keen to obtain positive assessments and may therefore be inclined to play up their performance, especially in the presence of a powerful audience (e.g. a supervisor and colleagues). Because performance-oriented employees want others to see them as highly competent, the extent to which these others are actually present and have the power to decide on issues such as rewards and promotions seems to be a situational factor that will probably influence the use of exaggerated self-promotion tactics among performance-oriented workers.

However, if it is likely that their exaggerated self-promotion actions will be unmasked, individuals are likely to refrain from such behaviors. This is due to the risk that this will lead to negative evaluations, which is exactly what they want to avoid. Therefore, to what extent this powerful audience is active in monitoring the actor, and in providing him or her with feedback about his or her performance, would seem relevant. If the audience watches an employee closely, it is more likely that exaggeration of performance will be revealed; this will motivate a performance-oriented employee to abstain from self-promotion behaviors. The performance management literature (e.g. Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017), as well as goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990), have indeed indicated that feedback is a critical contextual component that affects the behavior of employees, especially when that feedback comes from powerful others (Aguinis & Pierce, 2008). Therefore, in the current study the impact of the combined presence of a perceived powerful audience, and the salience of the feedback that this audience provides on the relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion, will be investigated.

The current study is focused on making several contributions. First, the study aims to add to the performance management literature by interrelating constructs from impression management, goal orientation, accountability, and goal-setting theories. Second, it aims to add to the impression management literature by focusing on a specific type of self-promotion that may negatively affect organizational performance and that has only been highlighted sporadically in previous research. Third, it aims to contribute to the performance-approach orientation literature by linking this orientation to two contextual variables – perceived audience power and the salience of feedback – that might influence the behavior of those with a high performance-approach orientation. Furthermore, the study also has practical relevance, because it highlights that the performance of those with high and those with low performance-approach orientations should be managed differently.

## Theory and hypotheses

Impression management is the process by which individuals attempt to influence the manner in which others perceive them, in a positive way (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995). This can pertain, for example, to being perceived as pretty, having power, being humorous, or being an expert (Wayne & Ferris, 1990).

As long as these manipulations are realistic they may affect organizations in a positive way. For example, if an applicant is able to persuade a selection committee that he or she is the best candidate for a specific job, and this optimal fit is truthful, selecting this person will likely contribute to organizational performance. To give another example, if team members are well informed about each other's expertise, because all team members clearly voice their capabilities, this will positively affect team performance; because tasks can be assigned to the right person, capabilities will be used properly and coordination of team activities will be facilitated (e.g. Grutterink, Van der Vegt, Molleman, & Jehn, 2013). However, if the manipulations of perceptions result in unrealistic and overstated perceptions of the qualifications of the focus person, this is likely to lead to poor managerial decisions. For example with respect to promotions, ultimately resulting in impaired organizational performance (Bolino et al., 2008; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991). Such manipulations are a kind of self-promotion tactic (Harris et al., 2007; Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003; Turnley & Bolino, 2001), and these exaggerated behaviors are the focus of the current study.

Goal orientation is an individual difference variable that refers to the kind of goals an individual prefers to strive for; these preferences reflect what the person finds motivating (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; VandeWalle, 2003). An important type of goal orientation distinguished in the literature is performance-approach orientation. Individuals high in performance-approach orientation are motivated to demonstrate superior performance; they want others to evaluate their performance and underlying abilities positively (Button et al., 1996; Heintz & Steele-Johnson, 2004), and they aim to strengthen their image by presenting themselves as capable (Janssen & Prins, 2007; Van Yperen & Janssen, 2002). This typification makes it clear that individuals with a strong performance-approach orientation are easily tempted to engage in self-promotional behavior, and past research has indeed found a positive relationship between performance-approach orientation and self-promotion (Molleman et al., 2012). However, I will argue that the strength of this relationship depends on the characteristics of the social context.

The first relevant contextual factor I will focus on is the presence of an audience (Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Locke & Latham, 1990). In a work setting, the audience primarily consists of the people who are closest to the actor: the supervisor and colleagues. Employees with a strong performance-approach orientation are keen to obtain positive assessments and may therefore be inclined to play up their performance, especially in the presence of an audience that has some control over the outcomes relevant to these employees, such as rewards or promotions. It is likely that, for most employees, issues such as pay and promotions are highly important, and, if employees think that supervisors and colleagues can influence these outcomes, they will perceive this audience as being powerful. The presence of a powerful audience is likely to enhance self-promotion behaviors among actors with a performance-approach orientation, because such behaviors can create a positive image of the actor among the people who form the audience, and this will

lead to favorable evaluations and ultimately to positive outcomes for the actor, such as being selected for an appealing job (Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Rosenfeld et al., 1995). So the mere presence of a powerful audience is likely to strengthen the positive relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion. Therefore, the following is hypothesized:

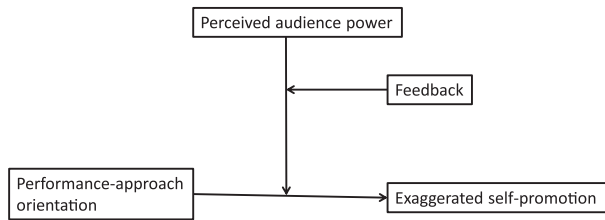
*Hypothesis 1:* Perceived audience power moderates the positive relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion such that the relationship is stronger when employees perceive the audience as being powerful.

Those with a strong performance-approach orientation want to avoid failure, negative evaluations of their qualifications, or disapproval (Brett & VandeWalle, 1999; Button et al., 1996; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; VandeWalle, 2001). Exaggerated self-promotional behavior is generally considered to be an undesirable kind of behavior. If the overstating of one's performance is revealed, others might feel deceived and manipulated, and may consequently alter their evaluation of the actor in a negative sense (Bolino & Turnley, 2003), and this is precisely what those with a strong performance-approach orientation aim to avoid. Realizing that others may become aware of such socially disapproved behavior may inhibit the willingness of performance-oriented individuals to engage in it (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). Goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) as well as the performance management literature (e.g. Aguinis et al., 2011, 2012a; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017) has indicated that feedback is a critical contextual factor that influences the behavior of employees, especially when that feedback comes from powerful others (Aguinis & Pierce, 2008). Therefore, feedback will be the second contextual factor I will focus on.

From feedback, actors learn about the appropriateness of their task performance (Ashford, 1986), and feedback may also point to inadequate task performance (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). Therefore, it is likely that such feedback makes exaggerated self-promoting behaviors much more salient; this will enhance awareness among those with a strong performance-approach orientation that others are likely to unmask their exaggeration of their capabilities and performance. This may lead to negative evaluations, and it is therefore likely that those with a strong performance-approach orientation will abstain from self-promoting behaviors.

If the audience does not actively monitor actors and does not provide them with feedback, those with a strong performance-approach orientation are much more likely to believe that they can successfully influence the perceptions of the audience by overstating their performance. Furthermore, those with low performance-approach orientation scores do not have a strong motivation to self-promote, and this behavior will therefore be less affected by the presence of an audience, irrespective of whether that audience provides feedback or not. Following the arguments presented above, it is expected that perceived audience power and feedback will jointly modify the relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion. The following is hypothesized:





**Figure 1.** Conceptual model.

*Hypothesis 2:* Perceived audience power and feedback jointly moderate the positive relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion such that a powerful audience will weaken the positive relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion if that audience gives much feedback, and will strengthen this relationship if the level of feedback is low.

The conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

## Method

### Participants

Employees from two Dutch firms participated in the study. One of these organizations was a public organization and operates in the service sector; its main responsibility is the collection of traffic fines. The tasks that the respondents perform include maintaining contacts with legal officers, IT tasks, carrying out enforcement instructions, and dealing with objections. The other organization was a semi-public company, operating in the field of water management, whose tasks include the regulation of groundwater levels, the purification of effluent water, the management of pumping-stations, the regulation of water recreation activities, and the monitoring of dykes. The tasks of these employees include maintenance of water purification installations, ICT support, running audits, and administrative duties.

A survey was sent to 506 randomly selected employees from the two organizations; 277 responses without missing data were received (response rate: 54.7%). Of these respondents, 65.3% were male. Their average age was 41.3 years and their average company tenure was 11.3 years. Regarding educational background, most respondents had completed vocational training (48.7%) or high school (39.7%). The management of both participating organizations indicated that these figures did not differ from the corresponding figures for all employees of the firm, and that the group of respondents was representative for their employee population with respect to these demographic characteristics.

### Measurements

Seven-point Likert-type items were used for all scales, anchored by 'strongly disagree' (score 1) and 'strongly agree' (score 7).



### ***Performance-approach orientation***

To measure performance-approach orientation, the scale developed by Elliot and McGregor (2001) with three items was used. A sample item is: 'It is important for me to do better than others in my working environment' (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ).

### ***Perceived audience power***

This variable was measured using four items based on Emans, Turusbekova, Broekhuis, and Molleman (2004), and Hinkin and Schriesheim (1989). The items were: 'Evaluation by my supervisor regarding my tasks may influence whether or not I get a promotion' and 'Evaluation by my supervisor regarding my tasks may influence whether or not I get a higher salary', and the same two items in which 'supervisor' was replaced by 'colleagues'. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this scale was .91. Although the alpha is high, one could argue that for such decisions the supervisor will play a more prominent role than colleagues will. The items indeed suggest that. The mean of the two 'supervisor' items is 3.33 and for the two 'colleagues' items 2.66. However, it is likely that supervisors also obtain information from other sources, including colleagues, about the functioning of an employee. In many firms this is even a normal part of the performance evaluation system (Aguinis & Pierce, 2008). So, although the roles of a supervisor and colleagues may be different, the opinions of colleagues will likely count. An explorative factor analysis (EFA) showed that the eigenvalues of the four un-rotated factors are 3.16, .42, .34, and .08, respectively. This distribution clearly indicates that a one-dimensional solution (explaining 79% of the variance) fits the data best. The loadings of these four items on this single factor are all  $>.85$ . These statistics seem to justify that the four items were combined into one scale.

### ***Feedback***

Feedback was measured using eight items from Hackman and Oldham (1980), and Emans et al. (2004). Two items referred to receiving feedback in general (e.g. 'I get feedback regularly about how well I do my tasks'), three items referred to getting feedback from the supervisor (e.g. 'My supervisor provides me with a lot of feedback about how well I am doing my tasks'), and three items pertain to receiving feedback from colleagues (e.g. 'My co-workers often let me know how well they think I am performing my tasks'). The mean of the two 'general' items is 4.30, of the three 'supervisor' items it is 3.92, and of the three 'colleagues' items 4.05. These numbers indicate that supervisors and colleagues are about equally relevant in terms of giving feedback. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of this scale = .89. An EFA produced eigenvalues for the first four unrotated factors of 4.55, 1.32, .65, and .58, respectively. A scree plot indicates that a one-factor solution is preferred, explaining 57% of the variance. All items load above .65 on this factor, and the correlations between these items are above .30, which is acceptable for items belonging to the same scale (Nunnally, 1967). These statistics seem to justify combining the eight items into one scale.

### ***Exaggerated self-promotion***

Existing scales used to measure self-promotion (e.g. Bolino & Turnley, 1999; Higgins & Judge, 2004; Wayne & Ferris, 1990) have items that refer to realistic self-promotion (e.g. ‘making your supervisor aware of your accomplishments’), as well as to items that relate to overstating one’s qualifications (e.g. ‘trying to make a positive event that you are responsible for appear better than it actually is’). The current study focuses exclusively on the overstatement of qualifications and performance, because this type of self-promotion in particular might lead to poor decision-making that can impair organizational performance. Three items from Wayne and Ferris (1990, p. 494) that pertain to this kind of self-promotion were used. In addition to the item mentioned above, these items are ‘Try to take responsibility for positive events, even when you are not solely responsible’ and ‘Play up the value of a positive event that you have taken credit for’ (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .66$ ).

The alpha for this scale is rather low and, therefore, an EFA was conducted over the three items belonging to this scale. The eigenvalues of the three un-rotated factors are 1.79, .68, and .52, respectively, indicating that a one-dimensional solution explaining 60% of the variance fits the data best. The loadings of the three items on this first factor are all  $>.70$ , also suggesting a good fit. In addition, the alpha could not be increased, leaving out one or more items. Furthermore, the mean correlation between the three items is .39, which can be seen as acceptable for items belonging to the same scale (Nunnally, 1967). Looking at these statistics, it can be concluded that the items seem to represent one dimension and form an acceptable scale.

### ***Data analysis***

To find support for the validity of the measurements, an EFA was conducted including all the 18 items of the study (performance-approach orientation [3 items], perceived audience power [4 items], feedback [8 items] and self-promotion [3 items]) and four factors were extracted. This four-factor solution explained 65.7% of the variance, and, after Varimax rotation, all the items loaded on the factor they belonged to, with all loadings  $>.55$  and all cross-loadings  $<.30$ . These results underline the validity of the measurements. In addition, the eigenvalue of the first unrotated factor is 5.57, explaining 30.9% of the variance, which suggests that common method bias is not a severe problem. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicates that the hypothesized model with four latent factors fits the data moderately good (CFI = .88). All items load significantly on their latent factor and the model is substantially better than a model with one latent factor (CFI = .39,  $\Delta \chi^2 = 1534.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

To test the hypotheses, moderated regression analyses were conducted following the procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991): (1) standardize the predictors to reduce multicollinearity between these variables and their interaction

term, (2) multiply the standardized predictor variables to calculate their interaction term, (3) include the ‘main’ effects in the model to prevent a biased estimate of the interaction, and (4) compute regression equations to depict a significant interaction effect, using values of the predictors that lie  $\pm 1$  SD from their means.

The following control variables were considered: firm, gender, age, and educational level. The variable ‘Firm’ was coded as 0 = firm operating in the field of water management and 1 = organization that collects traffic fines. The other control variables were self-reported: gender (male = 1, female = 2), age (in years), and education level (in the Dutch education system this ranges from elementary education [level 1] to university degree [level 8]). With respect to the control variables, I followed the recommendations of Becker (2005), which are widely accepted in management and behavioral sciences (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). Becker recommends to include only those control variables that are significantly related to the dependent variable, in order to avoid biased parameter estimates and to reduce the risk of Type II errors due to lowered statistical power. None of the above-mentioned control variables were significantly related to the dependent variable ‘Exaggerated self-promotion’ (see Table 1). If the four control variables (firm, gender, age, and educational level) are included as a first step in the model to predict ‘Exaggerated self-promotion’, they together account for a non-significant increase of the *R*-square (.02;  $F(4,269) = 1.06, p = .38$ ). Moreover, there are no theoretical reasons to expect that the four control variables are related to the dependent variable, which is an additional reason not to include them (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). Therefore, following Becker’s recommendations and those of Bernerth and Aguinis, these variables were not included in the regression analyses when testing the hypotheses. The hypotheses were tested in three steps. In the first step, the three main effects of performance-approach orientation, perceived audience power, and feedback were entered. In the second step, the three two-way interactions between the three predictors were added to the regression model: ‘performance-approach orientation by perceived audience power’, ‘performance-approach orientation by feedback’, and ‘perceived audience power by feedback’. In the third step, the three-way interaction ‘performance-approach

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables.

	Mean	SD	F	G	A	E	PO	PAP	FB
Firm (F)	.34	.47							
Gender (G; male = 1, female = 2)	1.35	.48	.16*						
Age (A)	41.33	8.79	-.31**	-.23..					
Education (E)	5.17	1.86	.39**	-.01	-.08				
Performance-approach orientation (PO)	3.74	1.39	-.07	-.06	-.09	.01			
Perceived audience power (PAP)	2.93	1.39	.05	.08	-.16*	.01	.20**		
Feedback (FB)	4.05	1.16	.07	-.04	.01	.21**	.06	.37**	
Self-promotion	2.32	.85	.08	-.03	-.03	.09	.20**	.28**	.12

\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ .

orientation by perceived audience power by feedback' was entered to test the combined effect of the moderator's perceived audience power and feedback on the relationship between performance-approach orientation and self-promotion.

## Results

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the variables, as well as the correlations between these variables. Performance-approach orientation is positively related to perceived audience power ( $r = .20$ ) and self-promotion ( $r = .20$ ), and perceived audience power is positively related to feedback ( $r = .37$ ) and self-promotion ( $r = .28$ ). The results of the regression analyses are reported in Table 2.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that perceived audience power would moderate the positive relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion such that the relationship would be stronger when employees perceived the audience as being powerful. Table 2 (model 2) shows that the interaction between performance-approach orientation and perceived audience power is not significant ( $B = .01$ ,  $t = .09$ , ns). While performance-approach orientation is positively related to exaggerated self-promotion, this relationship is not significantly stronger if perceived audience power is high. These results do not support hypothesis 1.

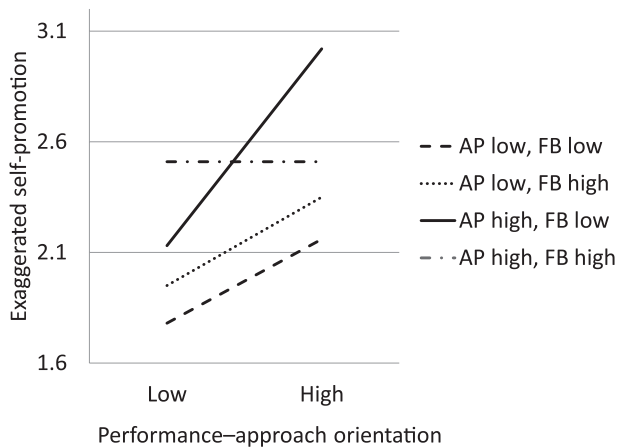
The second hypothesis predicted that perceived audience power and feedback would jointly moderate the positive relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion such that a powerful audience would weaken the positive relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion if that audience gave much feedback, and would strengthen this relationship if the level of feedback was low. Table 2, model 3, shows that the three-way interaction between performance-approach orientation, perceived audience power, and feedback is significant. To interpret this three-way interaction, this effect was plotted (Figure 2), and simple slopes as well as

**Table 2.** The interactive influence of performance-approach orientation (PO), perceived audience power (PAP), and feedback (FB) on self-promotion.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Predictors	B	B	B
PO	.13**	.14**	.17**
PAP	.20***	.21***	.21***
FB	.02	.01	.03
PO $\times$ PAP		.01	.02
PO $\times$ FB		-.07	-.09
PAP $\times$ FB		-.06	-.04
PO $\times$ PAP $\times$ FB			-.08*
<i>F</i> -model	10.09***	5.74***	5.39***
$R^2$	.10***	.11***	.13***
$R^2$ change	.10***	.01	.01*

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The hypothesized weights were tested one-sided.



**Figure 2.** Relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion for low and high perceived audience power (AP) combined with low and high levels of feedback (FB).

differences between slopes were also tested. Simple slope tests show that the slope of 'high perceived audience power – low feedback' differs from zero ( $B = .35$ ,  $t = 3.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ; solid line in Figure 2). Also the simple slope of the 'low perceived audience power – low feedback' line is significant ( $B = .17$ ,  $t = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ; dashed line in Figure 2). The slope for 'low perceived audience power – high feedback' is not significant ( $B = .16$ ,  $t = 1.32$ , ns; dotted line in Figure 2). The slope for the 'high audience power – high feedback' is also not significant ( $B = .02$ ,  $t = .23$ , ns; dashed-dotted line in Figure 2). Slope difference tests show that only the difference between the 'high perceived audience power – low feedback' line (solid line in Figure 2) and the 'high perceived audience power – high feedback' line (dashed-dotted line in Figure 2) is significant ( $t = -2.32$ ,  $p < .05$ ). All the other differences are not significant. In other words, the relationship between performance-approach orientation and self-promotion is significantly more positive if perceived audience power is high and feedback is low, than when both perceived audience power and feedback are high. These results are in line with the second hypothesis, and so hypothesis 2 is supported.

## Discussion

The aim of the current study was to analyze important antecedents of exaggerated self-promotion. As long as self-promotion behaviors are based on real capabilities, such behaviors may influence managerial decision-making with respect to, for example, selection, task assignment and promotion in a way that contributes to organizational performance. However, if self-promotion is overstated and is based on invalid claims, this may lead to poor managerial decisions that likely will impair performance. Therefore it is important to understand how this undesirable type

of self-promotion can be controlled. An important antecedent of self-promotion is performance-approach orientation. Those with a strong performance-approach orientation want to demonstrate their competences and to be evaluated positively by relevant others. Therefore, such employees will be inclined to overstate their qualifications, which may lead to poor decisions. The goal of this study was to analyze when these individuals are indeed inclined to overstate, and when they are not. Below I will discuss the main outcomes of the study.

### ***Theoretical contribution***

There was a main effect of performance-approach orientation indicating that, in general, those high in performance-approach orientation exhibit more exaggerated self-promotion behaviors. Those with a strong performance-approach orientation want to demonstrate superior performance and want others to think positively about their capabilities; therefore, they will try to impress others, possibly by exaggerating their performance and capabilities. In addition, there was a main effect of perceived audience power, indicating that, if the audience is more powerful, people are inclined to demonstrate more exaggerated self-promotion (see also Rosenfeld et al., 1995). Apparently, if there are relevant others such as a supervisor or colleagues who have control over some of their personal work outcomes, such as rewards or promotions, employees are motivated to impress these others in a positive way.

The first hypothesis predicted that the positive relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion would be stronger when employees perceived the audience as being powerful. There was no support for this hypothesis. This can be explained by the significant three-way interaction that indicates that people with a strong performance-approach orientation respond more strongly to the presence of an audience; their response depends on the extent to which that audience monitors their performance. If the audience has considerable power but does not intensively monitor the behavior of an employee with a strong performance-approach orientation, that employee is more motivated to self-promote in an exaggerated way and apparently feels little concern that the audience might notice any overstatement of capabilities or performance. On the other hand, if the audience closely monitors this employee by providing extensive feedback, the employee probably realizes that any exaggeration of qualifications or performance is likely to be noticed. Since such an exaggeration is generally considered to be socially undesirable, this might lead to negative evaluations of the employee by the audience (Pfeffer, Fong, Cialdini, & Portnoy, 2006), exactly the thing that those with a strong performance-approach orientation wish to avoid (e.g. Bolino & Turnley, 2003). In such a situation, using exaggerated self-promotion tactics is more risky, and this will inhibit the use of these tactics among those with a strong performance-approach orientation.

For those with a weak performance-approach orientation, receiving feedback from a powerful audience does not seem to have any of these effects. Figure 2 suggests that those scoring low in performance-approach orientation demonstrate the highest level of self-promotion, if there is a powerful audience that gives feedback (left end of the dashed-dotted line in Figure 2). Perhaps employees with a weak performance-approach orientation are somewhat modest in demonstrating their capabilities to others, or they underestimate their own performance. Feedback might indicate to them that they should evaluate their own behavior more positively. If they do, this might lead to a higher level of exaggerated self-promotion being experienced. This explanation, however, is *post hoc* and speculative, and needs further empirical support. Following a trait activation approach (Seijts, Latham, Tasa, & Latham, 2004; Tett & Burnett, 2003), an alternative explanation for the horizontal 'high perceived audience power-high feedback' line (dashed-dotted line in Figure 2) might be that such a situation, with a powerful audience that intensively monitors performance, can be seen as what has been referred to as a 'strong' situation. According to this approach, personality traits (e.g. performance-approach orientation) matter less in such 'strong' situations. This, too, is a speculative *post hoc* explanation that needs additional research.

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it adds to the performance management literature by including constructs from impression management theory (i.e. exaggerated self-promotion), goal orientation theory (i.e. performance-approach orientation), accountability theory (i.e. the presence of a powerful audience), and goal-setting theories (i.e. receiving feedback). Regarding performance management, the findings of the current study make clear that performance-approach orientation is related to the use of exaggerated self-promotion tactics, but that this relationship depends on the presence of a powerful audience, as well as the extent to which this audience monitors the actor. Consequently, the findings suggest that the performances of those low and high in performance-approach orientation should be managed differently. As DeNisi and Murphy (2017, p. 429) state, 'It is disconcerting to see how much discussion of performance management exists, and how little evidence there is how it actually works.' This study contributes to our understanding of the working of performance management.

Next, the study contributes to the goal orientation literature by linking performance-approach orientation to two situational variables, perceived audience power and the salience of feedback, which, in combination, impact the behavior of those with a strong performance-approach orientation. Those with a strong performance-approach orientation want relevant others to evaluate them positively (Button et al., 1996). Therefore, they will be inclined to overstate their capabilities. However, if these others monitor them closely it is likely that they will notice this and, subsequently, this will lead to negative evaluations, something that those with a strong performance-approach orientation exactly want to avoid. In this way, the current study gives deeper insight into the relationship between performance-approach orientation and self-promotion behaviors.



Further, the findings add to the impression management literature by focusing on a specific type of self-promotion that may negatively affect organizational performance and that has not been investigated often in previous research. Self-promotion is a behavioral strategy through which individuals want others to see them as highly capable and competent (Bolino & Turnley, 2003). Where such claims are valid, the influence on organizational decision-making may have positive outcomes. However, if self-promotion involves exaggerating one's competences this will likely result in invalid and false perceptions by others. This may lead to poor decisions in the field of HRM, which consequently impair firm performance. Given that the consequences of valid and invalid claims seem to differ substantially, it is remarkable that the impression management literature does not explicitly differentiate between these two types of self-promotion. In this way, the current study contributes to the impression management literature. Since it is primarily the overstatement of abilities that leads to incorrect decisions that may impair organizational performance, I have focused exclusively on this type of self-promotion.

Finally, the current study adds to the accountability literature. If people act in the presence of an audience they feel more accountable for their behavior and this affects their behavior. This is particularly the case if the audience is actively involved by providing feedback to the actors (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). The current study adds to these insights by showing that this feedback from relevant others, differentially influences self-promotion behavior of those low and high in performance-approach orientation. Those with a strong performance-approach orientation are especially inclined to demonstrate exaggerated self-promotion in the presence of a powerful audience, because they want that this audience evaluate them positively. However, they seem to refrain from these behaviors if this audience closely monitors them by giving feedback, because this may reveal that these self-promotions are invalid. This likely leads to negative evaluations, and this is something these particular individuals want to avoid.

### ***Practical Implications***

In addition to these theoretical contributions, the findings also have practical relevance because they show how the performance of those with high and those with low performance-approach orientations should be managed differently. A high level of pressure to perform well will motivate employees to deliver a good performance, especially if a positive evaluation may lead to positive personal outcomes, such as job security, a higher reward, or promotion and career opportunities. However, a high level of pressure to perform well may also encourage employees to overstate their capabilities and performance. Employees with a strong performance-approach orientation will be inclined to use such exaggerated self-promotion tactics. If such overstatements are not revealed, this may lead to poor management decisions, for example with respect to the recruitment of new

employees or with respect to promotions. These poor decisions will eventually impair organizational performance. Therefore, it is important for management, first, to be able to identify exaggerated self-promotion behaviors (Gardner, 1992) and, second, to prevent the use of exaggerated self-promotion tactics among those with a strong performance-approach orientation. The easiest way to do this is to provide these employees with extensive feedback on their performance; this will lead to the belief that overstating one's performance is likely to be unmasked, leading to negative evaluations and, consequently, to negative personal outcomes. If it is not possible to give these employees such feedback, it is better to present oneself as a manager who has little control (i.e. power) over the outcomes of these workers, and to keep some distance, in order to avoid triggering the use of exaggerated self-promotion tactics among the performance-oriented employees. Those low in performance-approach orientation are less sensitive to the presence of an audience that may or may not provide feedback. This calls for the differentiated use of performance management tools, depending on the levels of performance-approach orientation.

### ***Limitations and directions for further research***

This study has some limitations, mainly the use of a cross-sectional design, the use of only one data collection method, and the use of only self-reported measurements. The cross-sectional design makes it impossible to draw conclusions about causality. However, the model (Figure 1) is in line with the theoretical reasoning, and it is unlikely that, for example, behavior (i.e. self-promotion) influences a personality trait (i.e. performance-approach orientation). Furthermore, with respect to the data collection method, it would be difficult to attribute the hypothesized significant three-way interaction to common method bias (Evans, 1985). With respect to using self-reported measurements, it seems best to ask employees themselves to score a personality trait such as performance-approach orientation. For perceived audience power, and received feedback as well, it seems desirable to ask for the worker's perceptions, because it is the perceptions of these factors that will influence the behavior of that worker. It is possible to ask others to rate the self-promotional behaviors of actors but, as has been argued, exaggerated self-promotion is often not unmasked. Therefore, one also needs the responses of the actors themselves. Nevertheless, it is recommended that future researchers employ a stronger design, such as a longitudinal design, and if possible, use multiple data collection methods and various data sources such as peer ratings.

Two Dutch organizations, one operating in the public sector and one in the semi-public sector, participated in the current study. This may limit the generalizability of the results. Although there is no indication why the relationships that were studied would be less relevant in the private sector or other types of industry, it would be desirable for the study to be repeated in other kinds of organizations. Moreover, it is possible that, in other countries with other cultures

(e.g. less individualistic cultures), the results of the current study might be less valid. Therefore, it is relevant to retest the hypotheses in other countries with other cultures.

Another point of concern might be the rather low reliability of the self-promotion scale ( $\alpha = .66$ ). The correlations among the three items and an EFA indicated that the scale was acceptable and a CFA showed that the hypothesized model with four latent factors fits the data moderately good. Moreover, it is not unusual that studies report and use measures with alpha's below .70 (see for some recent examples, Gonzalez-Mule, Courtright, DeGeest, Seong, & Hong, 2016; Hayibor & Collins, 2016; Weiss, Kolbe, Grote, Spahn, & Grande, 2017). Moreover, there was support for the predicted three-way interaction. It would be hard to find any such effect if unreliable measurements were used. Nevertheless, it may be wise to add items to this scale in future research to increase its reliability. If, for example, the average correlations between the items would be .4 (as was the average correlation between the three items used in the current study), adding two items would result in an alpha of .77 and adding three items would result in an alpha of .80 (see McKennell, 1970).

The influence of the social environment on the relationship between performance-approach orientation and exaggerated self-promotion was investigated; more specifically, the influence of the presence of a powerful audience and the extent to which that audience provides the actor with feedback. Apart from these factors, there may be other contextual factors that also influence the use of self-promotion tactics among performance-oriented employees that might be included in future research. Social factors that influence the noticeability of self-promotion behaviors would be especially good candidates for this (see e.g. Schlenker & Weigold, 1992; Sedikides et al., 2002). Task interdependence might also be such a factor. If task interdependence is high, employees can relatively easily keep an eye on each other (Molleman, 2009) so that exaggerated self-promotion behaviors would be more easily spotted; this is likely to reduce the use of such self-promotion tactics among performance-oriented employees. Personality traits other than performance-approach orientation may also influence the use of self-promotion tactics. Relevant traits may be, for example, narcissism (e.g. DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011) or need for approval (Gardner & Martinko, 1988).

Another challenge for future research is to look into the possibility that feedback works differently for those differing in level of performance-approach orientation. The literature pertaining to feedback-seeking behavior suggests that those either high or low in performance-approach orientation seek different kinds of feedback (VandeWalle, 2003). Those high in performance-approach orientation believe that capabilities are fixed and cannot easily be developed. Therefore, they might be less interested in feedback that focuses on processes and learning, and more interested in feedback that pertains to performance outcomes, especially if they think that they have performed well. In the same vein, they may be more sensitive

to the power of an audience than to the expertise of that audience (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003; VandeWalle, 2003).

## Conclusion

The increased importance of performing well has led to enhanced attention to performance management. Performance management should therefore be focused on detecting employees' invalid claims concerning their capabilities and performance; failing to notice these may lead to poor decisions and lower organizational performance. The current findings show that those with a strong performance-approach orientation have a stronger need to impress relevant others by making such invalid claims, especially if there is an audience that has the power to control individual outcomes such as rewards. However, if this audience provides the actors with extensive feedback, these individuals abstain from using such tactics, owing to the realization that their exaggerated claims might be unmasked, leading to negative evaluations and less positive personal outcomes. In conclusion, the findings suggest that performance should be managed differently, depending on the performance-approach orientation of the employee.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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